DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 313 167 PS 018 456

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TITLE The Class Council or Self-Discipline in a Democratic Classroom.
PUB DATE Aug 87
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the World Congress Meeting of the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquee (8th, Sydney, Australia, August 16-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *Class Organization; Classroom Environment; Classroom Techniques; Educational Practices; Elementary Education; *Participative Decision Making; Problem Solving; Program Implementation; *Student Participation; *Student Role; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

A class council can collectively decide what components will make up the instructional system in an elementary school class. A class council is a friendly assembly made up of the students and the teacher; it meets to discuss and make decisions about all aspects of the instructional system, including objectives, grading, and materials. Each student may act as discussion leader or secretary, has the right to vote on any issue, and has the duty to do what the class has agreed to do. With varying degrees of help from the classroom teacher, students can choose objectives based on needs, establish sequential examinations, gather and select materials, and share individual learning strategies. Problems may be caused by the time required to plan and organize the council; a shy or unconvinced teacher; shy, rebellious, or slow students; overcrowded classrooms; authoritarian or permissive parents; and an interfering administration. There are intelligent ways to deal with each problem. A student opinion questionnaire is included. (RH)

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THE CLASS COUNCIL OR SELF-DISCIPLINE IN A DEMOCRATIC CLASS-ROOM

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PS 018456

1. INTRODUCTION

By definition, a democratic class-room is an instructional system existing for the students and run by the students but it is not a free-for-all where everyone acts in complete disregard for the other members of the class: the teacher and the fellow students. Just the opposite takes place. Just as in real life, for which schools should prepare the youngsters, every single member of the class learns how to exercise the right to participate in decision making through discussion and vote; s/he also learns to assume the duty to perform what the group has decided. That is the philosophy underlying such socio-economic systems as cooperatives and all types of self-management.

This paper intends to show how a class-council can be used to create a democratic class-room.

2. UNIVERSAL DESIRABILITY OF PARTNERSHIP IN THE CLASS-ROOM

Some kind of democratic or participatory approach can be used in any socio-economic political system and at any school level.

2.1 Historically

Historically, it is known that Socrates practiced it in his dialoging; Galileo believed that he could not teach anyone anything--he could only help the learners learn what they wanted to learn; and more recently, Rudolf Dreikurs, a disciple of Alfred Adler, said that the good teacher leads each learner toward desiring to learn what the learner should learn. How this can be achieved will be seen in the description of the class council.

2.2 Today

In Western Europe, the Council of Europe has recommended the participatory approach to the Modern Languages Project.

In Poland, over one hundred university students have recently been asked to list some major qualities of successful teachers; they indicated that the teachers who enjoy the highest degree of respect and prestige are those who display the ability to treat their students as partners in learning. The same students stated their belief that a democratic or participatory instructional system is more conducive to efficient learning than either

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an autocratic or a liberal one, at the university level as well as in secondary schools (Szniežynski 1985).

As a matter of fact, such an instructional system has already been in operation in Hawaii and in Mainland United States in several elementary schools attended by children coming from various socio-economic communities. In these elementary schools, children learn respect for themselves and others by working daily with adults who treat them with respect and who expect the same. They learn responsibility from being given real responsibility, appropriate to their current capabilities.

3. THE CLASS-COUNCIL

3.1 Purpose

As soon as children are able to reason--generally at or about the age of seven but sometimes much earlier--a class council can be used to decide collectively what components will make up the instructional system in a particular class. Much time is wasted in schools and in other organizations because the people who are told or asked to do something don't understand why they should do it and therefore are not interested in doing it and do not do it to the best of their abilities.

3.2 Definition

As I explained in another article (Niedzielski 1971), the class council is a friendly assembly made up of the students and the teacher for the purpose of discussing and deciding all aspects of the instructional system--objectives, grading, materials--to be implemented in the given class. In a well run meeting, a student will act as discussion leader, another may take minutes and thus perform as secretary. Each student has the rights to speak (and others must listen), to disagree, and to vote on any issue. In turn s/he has the duty to perform whatever the class in the whole, (or s/he as an individual) has agreed to do.

3.3 Functions (Table 1)

3.3.1 Choosing Objectives Based on Needs

On the first day of class the teacher explains to the students the various options which they may choose as their objectives. Ideally, these objectives are based on well defined (inter)national, regional and local needs. In addition, objectives in a particular class may be set up to help

individual students to acquire and/or develop specific abilities necessary to reach adequate levels of proficiency in specialized fields or professions (Niedzielski 1983).

For instance, a foreign language course can prepare an individual learner to become either a translator, a FL teacher, a tour guide, a journalist, a singer, etc. Of course, it would be best to assess, at the beginning of the program, each learner's individual abilities to learn the language(s) for the specific purpose(s) needed in the community and attracting the learner.

As I said elsewhere (Niedzielski 1976), success breeds success and in order to predict possible success it is useful to assess present abilities.

3.3.2 Establishing Sequential Exams

The most meaningful grading procedure is not based on a letter or even number but rather on performance. For that reason, once the specific objectives have been established, the class-council likewise decides on a sequence of criterion reference exams which will help each student to progress step by step and reach sooner or later an acceptable level of performance for each objective s/he just chose with the help of the council. Of course, the teacher should have prepared ahead of time a set of exams which can be modified by the class council to fit the individual members of the class. The following questions: what will be tested, how, when, why, where, and by whom will help the council to design the most appropriate sequences of tests.

Just as objectives may vary from learner to learner according to specific needs, tests may be adjusted to each learner's socioeconomic, and cultural background, and to his/her physical, physiological, psychological, and psycho-linguistic characteristics. Ideally, each learner should receive personality and vocational analyses which would predict on which type of tests he has greater chances to succeed.

3.3.3 Gathering and Selecting Materials

When the objectives and the tests have been determined, it is time to select materials, i.e. the books to do the job. To proceed otherwise is not logical for it means that one has a tool and then looks for ways to use it. Yet, in some school situations the main tool is imposed, it is the basic textbook. This is not a real problem because official programs and materials are usually only recommended guidelines which must not be followed

rigorously but adjusted to local situations. This basic textbook can be supplemented with various self-made or bought materials proposed by the teacher or, preferably, discovered by the learners. The teacher will present the advantages and shortcomings of each, and advise each learner about the compatibility of a particular tool with the learner's characteristics.

3.3.4 Sharing Individual Learning Strategies

We have seen that, in the presentation and discussion of the instructional system, the teacher's main role is that of an advisor or counselor; every student participates freely in the decision making process and feels that the course is relevant to him or her.

The respect the teacher has shown the students in consulting with them and trusting their judgement soon starts bringing returns. Such students display a strong sense of responsibility and become very resourceful. They explore on their own various learning strategies suited to their individual characteristics and to the task(s) to be performed on each sequential test. The teacher helps them utilize their particular learning strategies by giving them advice, directions and encouragement, and also by evaluating their progress individually.

Remarkably, learners willingly share their strategies and techniques with other members of the class-council because they are proud of their findings, because their results on criterion reference tests do not depend on competition with others but only with self, and because their experience in the class-council develops their spirit of cooperation.

Furthermore, everyone in the class works with more enthusiasm. At the end of most classes, I have to remind my students that it is already 5 or 10 minutes beyond class time. On some occasions, they have requested additional work and, when it has meant more work for me, they have agreed to emphasize quality rather than quantity. I have really been impressed with their capacity for hard work created by their sense of responsibility generated by their complete control over the instructional system.

Thus, the class-council approach helps to shape future respectable, responsible, resourceful, imaginative and cooperative citizens: the kind of citizens needed in every nation and in the entire world.

4. POSSIBLE PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

4.1 Time Consuming Process

Some critics may say that the time spent on organizing the class-council, on choosing objectives, on establishing sequential exams, on gathering and selecting materials is wasted time because it is time taken away from instruction and studying. The answer is that, in any field, any major project which is not carefully considered and meticulously prepared before it is undertaken is usually doomed to fail. The same applies to learning situations. Uninterested students do not study or poorly; involved and interested students study much more rapidly and efficiently. Time spent on prior organizing and on continuous multilateral consultation is therefore wisely invested.

4.2 Shy or Unconvinced Teacher

It may be easier for a shy teacher to avoid speaking directly to the learners and, instead, to read from behind a book. That teacher should try anyway and tell the students that s/he desires to treat them as partners in order to help them learn better, and for that purpose s/he would like the class to elect a leader who will organize the class council. In most cases, the learners will be eager to help a teacher who is so concerned about their welfare.

4.3 Shy or Rebellious Students

Unfortunately, some students may be particularly shy or distrustful because of previous negative experience with teachers. It may then be necessary to resort at first to anonymous evaluation forms requesting their opinion about the entire instructional system, including the objectives, the teacher, the materials, the class-room atmosphere (see Table 2).

Feeling protected by the anonymity of their comments, students reveal their feelings and volunteer their solutions to any existing problems. The teacher discusses all suggestions. S/he thanks the students for positive remarks, explains some unpopular but necessary actions, and apologizes for errors which may have inadvertently hurt someone in the class.

4.4 Slow Students

It is possible for some learners to fall behind the sequential tests schedule determined by the class council. If a learner fails on a given

test, s/he is automatically allowed to retake the test as soon as possible a second, a third or even a fourth time.

In addition, in order not to waste too much time and also because sometimes students understand better their fellow learners than the teacher, teams of learners are made up consisting of faster and slower learners. In these mixed teams everyone benefits because some members receive additional help and those who help others consolidate their knowledge even more.

4.5 Overcrowded Classrooms

This problem is not really special to class council situations but it is mentioned here for particularly apprehensive teachers. The general solutions used in classes containing a very large number of learners apply here too. In extreme cases, several subcouncils can be formed. The delegate from each subcouncil can then meet independently with the teacher or establish a supercouncil which will meet with the teacher as a group. Of course, the students will decide with the teacher which type or representation--direct or indirect--they prefer to adopt. If the formula chosen at first is later found unsatisfactory, it can be changed. The key word here is flexibility.

4.6 Authoritarian Parents

When working with rather young children, for instance below the age of twelve, some teachers may encounter in parents-teachers organizations severe criticism from some parents who believe that instruction is an instrument of indoctrination, not inquiry. They may be reproached that the freedom the children enjoy at school is detrimental to the discipline at home. The answer of course is that the parents are right to require discipline at home but that the best discipline is self-discipline based on mutual respect and responsibility. Such self-discipline will be attained at home when the parents understand the value and functioning of the family council which they should organize with their child(ren) as soon as they wish to have peace and harmony at home. In addition, this will help the child(ren) at school too.

4.7 Permissive Parents

At the other end of the spectrum, teachers may have to deal with parents who are afraid that their child(ren) may be traumatized and who allow them everything. The child is the omnipotent center of the world enjoying all rights and no responsibility, therefore no homework.

The answer is for the teacher to work with the child within the class council, treat him/her with respect and inculcate in him/her the proper sense of responsibility. The child will decide whether or not s/he wants to do any homework. If the parents complain, the child will gently answer that it is his/her own choice and, in line with their laissez-faire, they will stop interfering.

4.8 Interfering Administration

Although it should be obvious that schools exist for the learners and not for the administrators, some administrations believe that they must decide unilaterally what courses should be taught and what the contents of these courses should be. This is, of course, a mistake because as we have mentioned earlier students who do not participate in decisions are not interested nor committed to their maximum; this also applies to teachers who are not consulted.

At least two situations can exist. The administration can side with the student against the teacher. This is very discouraging for the teacher. On the other hand, the administration can side with the teacher against the student. If this is repeated too often it can either lead to a student revolution or cause a decline in the enrollment at that school.

The general solution is the same for both situations, a school council must be established to arbitrate such conflicts. Such a school council is made up of an equal number of students and teachers and of one or two members of the administration most closely connected to the particular instruction unit where the problem arose.

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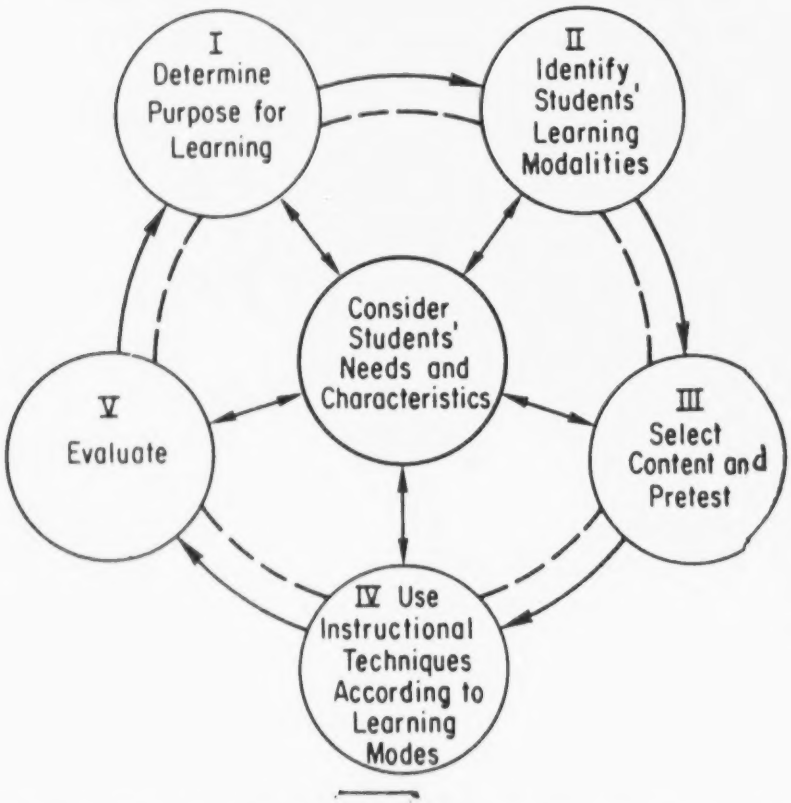
INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN TO IMPLEMENT STUDENT-CENTERED PROGRAMS



From: Anthony Papalia. Learner-Centered Langage Teaching. 1976. Newbury House Publishers. Page 53.

TABLE 1

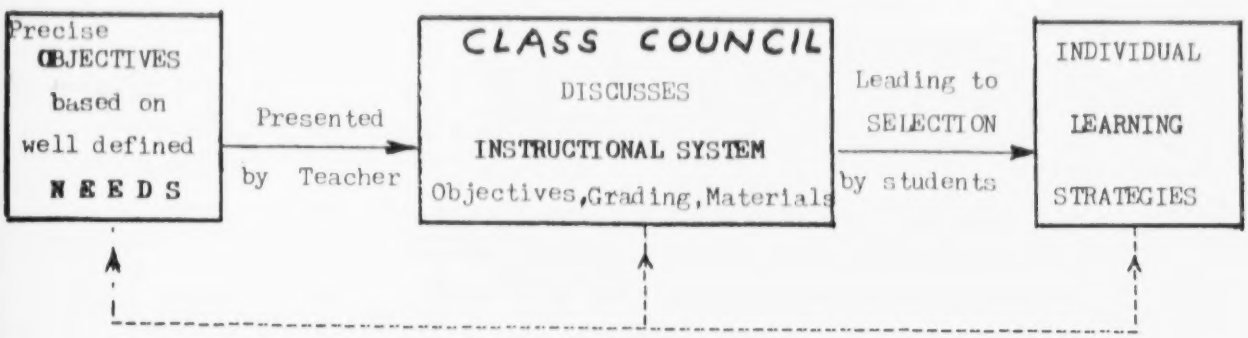


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TABLE 2 QUESTIONNAIRE

The purpose of this questionnaire is to enable the instructor to improve the course and the teaching.

Please answer the questions outside of class. You are encouraged to type or print to preserve your anonymity.

Your frankness will not in any way jeopardize the instructor's standing in the school, because no one else will see your comments.

1. INSTRUCTOR'S ORGANIZATION

Goals and Objectives: their clarity, their relevance; Learners' Needs and Abilities: their consideration, their utilization.

2. COURSE CONTENT

Topics and Grading: changes needed.

3. TEXT AND OTHER MATERIALS

Appropriate, too hard, too easy, how relevant, how innovative.

4. TEACHER'S INTERACTION

With the Class (encouraging, dominating, sensitive to lack of interest).
With Individual Students (accessible, respectful, helpful).

5. TEACHER'S DYNAMISM AND ENTHUSIASM

Self-confident, energeting, boring, enjoys teaching.

6. OWN SATISFACTION

Is the course meeting your expectations?
Yes or No, Why.